

# Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada

Journal of the  
Canadian Historical Association  
Revue de la  
Société historique du Canada

## Being Muslim in Soviet Central Asia, or an Alternative History of Muslim Modernity

Adeeb Khalid

Volume 18, numéro 2, 2007

Global Histories  
Histoires mondiales

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018226ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/018226ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)  
1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Khalid, A. (2007). Being Muslim in Soviet Central Asia, or an Alternative History of Muslim Modernity. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 18(2), 123–143. <https://doi.org/10.7202/018226ar>

### Résumé de l'article

La documentation relative à la modernité musulmane ne tient que très peu compte de l'expérience des sociétés musulmanes de l'Union soviétique, même si elles ont connu les transitions vers la modernité parmi les plus radicales qui soient. Les Soviétiques ont cherché une modernité différente, sans marchés ni libéralisme, laissant peu de place à la religion. Je fais valoir que le projet soviétique a réussi dans une large mesure. Cet article explore certaines des implications liées à notre compréhension de la modernité islamique si nous considérons sérieusement l'expérience des sociétés musulmanes soviétiques.

# Being Muslim in Soviet Central Asia, or an Alternative History of Muslim Modernity

ADEEB KHALID

## *Abstract*

*The literature on Muslim modernity takes little account of the experience of the Muslim societies of the Soviet Union, even though they might have undergone some of the most radical transitions to modernity. The Soviet sought a different kind of modernity, one without markets and liberalism, and one with little place for religion in it. I argue that the Soviet project succeeded to a great extent. This article explores some of the implications for our understanding of Muslim modernity if we are to take the experience of Soviet Muslim societies seriously.*

## *Résumé*

*La documentation relative à la modernité musulmane ne tient que très peu compte de l'expérience des sociétés musulmanes de l'Union soviétique, même si elles ont connu les transitions vers la modernité parmi les plus radicales qui soient. Les Soviétiques ont cherché une modernité différente, sans marchés ni libéralisme, laissant peu de place à la religion. Je fais valoir que le projet soviétique a réussi dans une large mesure. Cet article explore certaines des implications liées à notre compréhension de la modernité islamique si nous considérons sérieusement l'expérience des sociétés musulmanes soviétiques.*

In the decade and a half before the Soviet Union collapsed, one of the major preoccupations of Soviet watchers in the West was to wonder about the future demographic composition of the Soviet population. More precisely, the question that drove these projections related to the rising proportion of the Soviet population that would be Muslim.<sup>1</sup> Analysts debated what this shift would entail for the stability of the regime and, more concretely, for the functioning of

---

1 See, for example, Murray Feschbach, "The Soviet Union: Population Trends and Dilemmas," *Population Bulletin* 37, no. 3, (1982): 1-44; idem, "Trends in the Soviet Muslim Population: Demographic Aspects," in *The USSR and the Muslim World: Issues in Domestic and Foreign Policy*, ed. Yaacov Ro'i (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984), 63-94; William Fierman and Martha Brill Olcott, "The Challenge of Integration: Soviet Nationality Policy and the Muslim Conscript," *Soviet Union* 14, no. 1 (1987): 65-101.

the conscription-based Soviet army. The assumption, seldom stated explicitly, was that Soviet Muslims remained Muslims, their political behaviour subject to their Muslimness and immune to their Sovietness, and indeed immutable in general.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the ensuing war there brought this question to the forefront. Several books discussed the threat Islam and Muslims could pose to the Soviet state.<sup>2</sup> Rumours, completely unsubstantiated but influential, circulated that the Soviet army was not sending Muslim soldiers to Afghanistan,<sup>3</sup> and the Central Intelligence Agency thought that Muslims “could do a lot of damage to the Soviet Union.”<sup>4</sup> (It was, of course, the 1980s, and Muslims who posed threats to the Soviet Union were a good thing.) The Soviet Union collapsed without its Muslim population playing any significant role in its demise. Indeed, in 1991, in the last year of its existence, support for the continued existence of the USSR was nowhere higher than in the Muslim-majority republics of Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> Central Asians proved to be the most Soviet of all Soviet citizens.

Today we know better, not only because we have the illicit luxury of hindsight on our side, but also because we can question some of the highly problematic assumptions about both Islam and Soviet life that underlay the prognostications of the late-Soviet period. The Muslims of the Soviet Union were the “forgotten Muslims” of the world,<sup>6</sup> and it was very easy to think about them in abstractions. The Soviet Union is no more, and along with hindsight has come unprecedented access to the lands it controlled and to the sources for their history. The histories of the various Muslim groups of the USSR have been (and are being) rewritten, and many of our assumptions about them have been revised. My paper is part of this endeavour. I want to present a history of Muslims in the Soviet Central Asia (where the majority of the Soviet Union’s Muslims lived), free of essentialist assumptions about Islam and Communism.

---

2 Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet Union* (London: Croom Helm, 1983); Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1985); Michael Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia* (London: Hurst, 1982); Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *L'Empire éclaté: la révolte des nations en URSS* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978).

3 The rumours made it all the way into a research note prepared by the Rand Corporation: S. Enders Wimbush and Alex Alexiev, *Soviet Central Asian Soldiers in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA.: Rand Corp., 1982).

4 CIA director William Casey, quoted by Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 104-05.

5 Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 129.

6 Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejey, *Les Musulmans oubliés: l'islam en URSS aujourd'hui* (Paris: François Maspero, 1981).

## BEING MUSLIM IN SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA, OR AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF MUSLIM MODERNITY

Considered thus, this history can also help rethink our understanding of broader questions of global or world history of the twentieth century.

The Muslim societies of Central Asia have been an integral part of the Islamic world for centuries.<sup>7</sup> Islam came to Central Asia in the eighth century, and the oasis cities of Transoxiana had become tied into the networks of the broader Islamic world by the tenth century of the common era. Over the centuries, Transoxiana produced any number of figures of central importance to the Islamic tradition. It was only in the twentieth century that the Muslims of Central Asia were “forgotten,” both by other Muslims and — more importantly for the present argument — by those who study Muslim societies. The Muslims of Central Asia might number over 50 million and might represent some of the oldest Muslim societies in the world; they might have undergone some of the most radical transitions to modernity; but they play almost no role in our broad generalizations about Islam or Muslim societies in the modern world, and their experience in no way informs our understanding of the Muslim world’s encounter with modernity.

The usual narrative of the modern Muslim world begins with the rise of modernist movements in the nineteenth century, both among intellectuals and among state elites where such were left intact (mostly the Ottoman Empire and Iran), but this narrative centres on the establishment of national states after World War I, and especially in the period of decolonization after World War II. Through the creation of new internal markets, of systems of public education, the new national states garnered new forms of political organization, new forms of solidarity based on new identities and new kinds of civic and ethnic commitments. The middle decades of the twentieth century saw massive state- and nation-building projects in a number of Muslim states, as a result of which

---

7 The term “Central Asia” has no fixed referent in the contemporary geographic imagination. It coexists with other markers, such as Inner Asia, Eurasia, or Central Eurasia. With the exception of the last, these terms have a long history, but they have acquired new visibility in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which both ended the utility of the term “Soviet,” and made it possible to think or rethink space in new ways. Yet, fifteen years later, there is no consensus on terminology, and no clear demarcation of the region. Now that Afghanistan is back in the news, it is often classified as Central Asia for reasons of geographical proximity. Indeed, confusion is heightened by a semantic shift in Russian in this regard. Soviet usage distinguished *Sredniaia Aziia*, literally “Middle Asia,” which referred only to the four Soviet republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Türkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, from *Tsentral’naia Aziia*, “Central Asia,” which included Xinjiang, Mongolia, and (more or less) Kazakhstan. In post-Soviet times, Russian-language usage has shifted rapidly, and under the influence of English, *Tsentral’naia Aziia* has emerged as the sole term in current use. I use the term “Central Asia” to denote Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the five countries that emerged as sovereign states from the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is the experience of the Soviet past that demarcates the region as one (and quite different from its neighbours to the south). The closest parallels exist with other Muslim-majority regions of the former Soviet Union and with Xinjiang in the People’s Republic of China.

the idea of the territorial nation-state became part of the common sense of modern Muslim life. Although many of the nation-states in the Muslim world sought to restrain the market and pursued *étatiste* programmes, they nevertheless existed in a wider world order defined by capitalism and markets.<sup>8</sup>

The last third of the twentieth century saw a rise of Islam as a political force, as new understandings of Islam encroached on a political field that had in many places been monopolized by state-centred nationalism or patriotism. A number of scholars have pointed out how this new potency of Islam as a political force is in no way a return to the past, but a result of new developments in the Muslim world. Although some Islamist movements espouse a vaguely pan-Islamic rhetoric, the new Islamist politics is very much a creation of the twentieth century. It exists in the political terrain created by the nation-state and is inconceivable without it.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the rise of Islam as a potent force has called attention to the tensions generated in the Muslim world by modernity in its liberal guise, with many seeking the answer in essentialist theories of clash of civilizations that posit an innate inability on the part of Muslims to become modern. The rise of Islamism is seen as a “failure” of modernity in the Muslim world, a failure brought about by certain essential characteristics inherent in Islam itself.<sup>10</sup>

This basic narrative of the rise of modern forms of state and economic power and their repercussions works quite well for most of the Middle East and North Africa, and maybe even for South and Southeast Asia. Yet it is problematic to gloss it (as it often is) as the dominant experience of the Muslim world. Such a narrative has little bearing for the Muslim communities of the former Russian empire, which experienced the twentieth century in a radically different form. They found themselves at the centre of a massive project to achieve a different kind of modernity, one without markets and liberalism, and one which had little place for Islam — or any other religion — in it. I argue that the Soviet project succeeded to a great extent. My goal in this paper is to examine the ways in which Soviet modernity transformed Muslim societies. I will speak of Central Asia (and even more specifically, of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the heirs to the sedentary oasis-based civilization of Transoxiana),

---

8 For general academic surveys of the topic, see: James P. Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Reinhard Schulze, *A Modern History of the Islamic World*, trans. Azizeh Azodi (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

9 See, for example, Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, eds., *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 2003); M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

10 Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003).

## BEING MUSLIM IN SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA, OR AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF MUSLIM MODERNITY

although much of what I say applies to other Muslim societies of the former Soviet Union, such as those of Azerbaijan, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chechnya, and Daghestan.

### MUSLIMS IN SOVIET MODERNITY

The Soviet project aimed at the total transformation of society, to achieve a socialist modernity — one that would surpass in results the bourgeois modernity that had given rise to socialism and have higher moral credentials. These lofty ideals gave the party-state license to undertake highly coercive measures to hurry along the “wheel of history,” but they also meant that the Soviet Union was, first and foremost, a developmentalist state that judged itself by its own modernizing agenda. It was this last that won it considerable legitimacy both among its own population and in the decolonizing world at large.

### Radical Social Transformation and Cultural Revolution

In Central Asia, the Communist Party’s agenda for social and cultural transformation captured the imagination of local modernist intellectuals who had articulated a vision of change for their society that was rooted firmly in transnational Muslim discourses of modernity.<sup>11</sup> The Russian revolution coincided with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the last Muslim power to have survived into the modern world. The Ottoman defeat produced a sense of desperation among Muslim intellectuals throughout the world, and pushed them in the direction of a more radical critique of bourgeois modernity that for them was synonymous with colonialism. The Bolsheviks claimed anti-colonial credentials for themselves and spoke incessantly in the early years of “setting the East ablaze,” of fomenting an anti-colonial revolution that would lead to the liberation of “the East,” including the Muslim world, from colonialism. Indeed, the Russian revolution was the moment of the birth of “Third-Worldism,” and Russian Muslims played a key part in it.<sup>12</sup> Anti-colonialism and the promise of rapid, radical change drew modernist intellectuals to Soviet rule in Central Asia.

Modernist Islamic reform had come to Central Asia at the turn of the twentieth century, and was known locally as Jadidism. While it was rooted in debates over the relationship between the Islamic tradition and the modern

---

11 Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

12 Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemerrier-Quellejaye, *Sultan Galiev. Le père de la révolution tiers-mondiste* (Paris: Fayard, 1986); see also Adeeb Khalid, “The Fascination of Revolution: Central Asian Intellectuals, 1917-1924,” in *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia*, ed. Tomohiko Uyama (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007), 137-52.

world that raged all over the Muslim world, Jadidism nevertheless had local specificities. It began in the late nineteenth century with a critique of traditional Muslim education and culminated in the advocacy of a far-ranging transformation of many aspects of communal life. The key concepts in Jadidism were “civilization” (*madaniyat*) and “progress” (*taraqqiy*), which the Jadids assimilated into their understanding of Islam to produce a vigorously modernist interpretation of Islam, in which the achievement of “civilization” (always in the singular) came to be seen as the religious obligation of all Muslims.<sup>13</sup>

The Russian revolution opened up a new world of possibilities for the Jadids. Until then, Jadidism had been limited to the reform of traditional schools and exhorting the Muslim community to heed the call for reform. After the revolution the Jadids hoped to lead change through the mechanisms of the state. The Bolsheviks who took power at the centre had an agenda of radical social and cultural transformation of their own, and for much of the 1920s, the Jadids and the Bolsheviks found areas where they could cooperate, however uncomfortably.

The 1920s were, therefore, years of great enthusiasm for the Jadids. In Bukhara, they found themselves at the helm of an ostensibly independent state, the People’s Soviet Republic of Bukhara. They embarked on a program of national and cultural reform that dated from before the revolution. They set out to reform the maktab and the madrasas and to systematize them in a network of public education. The ulama had been the main source of hostility to the Young Bukharans before 1920, and many of them suffered in the aftermath of the “revolution.” Some were executed (old accounts had to be settled), and many went into exile in Afghanistan. Others supported the uprising in the mountainous regions of eastern Bukhara (present-day Tajikistan) against the Bukharan republic. But several reformist figures and notables threw their support behind the new government. During its brief existence, the Bukharan government tried to organize “progressive” ulama around this core, holding congresses (very much on the revolutionary pattern in vogue since 1917) to express support for reforming Islam, for the policies the government, and against international imperialism. The Young Bukharans also nationalized the large amount of property held as *waqf*, the Islamic institution of pious endowments. They tried to establish a system of public health, and sought to establish a *national* economy. The model for the Young Bukharans came not from Marx, but from modernist Muslim notions of change, especially those that had been developed in the late Ottoman empire. The years of the Bukharan republic coincided with the establishment of the Turkish Republic, and the two projects had much in common. This was not what the Bolsheviks had in mind, though, and

---

13 One of the main arguments of Adeeb Khalid in *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, CA : University of California Press, 1998).

## BEING MUSLIM IN SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA, OR AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF MUSLIM MODERNITY

they squeezed out the most “nationalist” members of the government by mid-1923.

In Turkestan, which was part of Soviet Russia, few Jadids got close to political power. Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks were keen to attract members of the indigenous population into their ranks, and the earliest years of the new regime saw a substantial influx on Muslims into the party. Many Jadids joined up, but they were upstaged by a different group of Muslims — those with Russian educations, who could function much more effortlessly in Russian than the Jadids. Many of them were Kazakhs from Semirech’e province, then part of Turkestan. The most prominent indigenous political figure in the early years of Soviet rule was Turar Rysqulov (1894-1938), a Kazakh who had attended a so-called Russian-native school (schools run by the Tsarist government that provided basic literacy in Russian alongside the basic tenets of Islam) before attending a school of agronomy in Pishpek (now Bishkek). He was not a Jadid because he had no previous connection to the reform of education or culture. His path to politics was quite direct. During the revolution, he became politically active, and emerged in 1919 as the chairman of the “Muslim Bureau” of the local Communist party, an office that was supposed to work for the inclusion of the Muslim population of the region into the Party. By the end of the year he had become chair of the central executive committee of Soviet Turkestan, the highest office in the executive branch of regional government under the new regime. To be sure, the executive authority of Soviet Turkestan was subordinate to the centre, but Rysqulov was the first of many natives to head regional government. His passion was the revolutionary mobilization of the local population with the aim of achieving economic and political equality with Russians within the new Soviet state, and working towards a world revolution that would liberate the colonial world from European rule. His enthusiasm for anti-colonial revolution led him on occasion even to criticize Lenin for his lack of zeal in the matter.<sup>14</sup> Rysqulov was succeeded by a series of other figures from similar backgrounds, men comfortable with Russian and in the intrigues of power, but with few roots in Muslim reform.

The Jadids, however, dominated the cultural realm for much of the decade, during which they worked to create a new *national* culture and cultural identity. What allowed the Jadids to do all this was the Soviet regime’s commitment to overcoming backwardness and revolutionizing culture. The state was to play a central role in the matter of culture. If the Tsarist regime had shied away from substantial intervention in local society, the Bolsheviks were the very opposite. It was the state’s revolutionary goal to “build culture.” The state provided funds for the opening of new schools, the publication of newspapers, magazines, and books, and even for theatre. The Soviets also sought to “indigenize” their

---

14 T. R. Ryskulov, *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh* (Almaty: Qazaqstan 1998), 3:182-7.



regime in order to overcome the distrust of the indigenous population towards them as outsiders. As early as 1918, they declared Uzbek the official language of Turkestan alongside Russian (by 1921 Turkmen and Kazakh had also been elevated to this status). Although Russian continued to dominate until the end of the Soviet period, this official recognition was important. If nothing else, it opened up the necessity of reforming local languages and modernizing their vocabulary. The Soviets also sponsored large-scale ethnographic “exploration” on the assumption that the land and its people had to be better understood if they were to be incorporated into the new regime. All of this opened up vast arenas of cultural work into which the Jadids stepped with gusto.

The Jadids also poured a great deal of energy into the creation of modern schools. The first state-run schools for the indigenous population were new-method schools of Jadid provenance, which were taken over by local soviets (councils) and turned into Soviet schools. Teachers from Jadid schools provided the bulk of the workforce in early Soviet schools, and early primers and textbooks bore a clear Jadid imprint in terms of content, style, and subject.

For their part, the Bolsheviks made several concessions in the early 1920s to win the trust of the local population. During the civil war, the local Soviet government had “nationalized” all waqf property, and turned over agricultural lands to the peasants who worked on them. This was partially revoked in 1922, when non-agricultural waqf properties were returned to the mosques or madrasas that benefitted from them. (Agricultural waqf property remained under the use of those who worked it.) But this was not a return to the pre-revolutionary status quo. Waqf property was to be overseen by local waqf sections subordinate to a central waqf administration in Tashkent. Waqf was thus bureaucratized and brought within the purview of the state. This was a reform that the Jadids had long advocated, and that their counterparts in Bukhara had also put into practice. Waqfs, they argued, had always been meant for educational purposes, and it was the community’s obligation to take them over the progress of national culture. For much of the decade, the central waqf administration, run by Muslims, presented itself as an agent of progress and reform, an institutional arm of society helping with the upkeep of mosques and funding the fledgling network of modern schools.

Changing the position of women was another area where Bolshevik aims found resonance among the Jadids, who had long argued that the progress of Islam and the nation required that women be educated and that they take an active part in public life. After the revolution, the Jadids emerged as major proponents of changing women’s position in Muslim society. Their main concerns were with education, marriage at very young ages, polygyny, and, increasingly, unveiling.

Among the sedentary populations of Central Asia — in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan — women’s seclusion was a basic fact of the social order, connected

## BEING MUSLIM IN SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA, OR AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF MUSLIM MODERNITY

as it was with concepts of honour, shame, respect, and hierarchy. It was marked by a dress code that required women, when outside the house, to wear a heavy cotton robe that came down to the ankles (*paranji*) and a veil of woven horse-hair (*chachvon*) that completely covered the face. In the period of Russian rule, the wearing of this combination seems to have become nearly universal among the sedentary population of Central Asia, to the point where the Bolsheviks saw wearing the *paranji-chachvon* as defining what it meant to be an Uzbek woman. For both the Jadids and the Bolsheviks, the *paranji-chachvon* was a hazard to women's health, in addition to being both the symbol and the means of their oppression and degradation. During the early 1920s, there were cases of women abandoning the veil and appearing in public places (including the theatre), but most women who worked, and even those engaged in political work, continued to wear the *paranji-chachvon*.

The turn to open intervention in local society in mid-1926 also meant a change in the Bolshevik policy on the question of women. That is, the liberation of women had to be accomplished in the same revolutionary way as the abolition of religion, and it was to be equated with unveiling. The campaign against the veil was nothing less than a *hujum*, assault. On 8 March 1927, international women's day and the tenth anniversary of the beginning of the Russian revolution, the Zhenotdel organized a series of mass meetings in which thousands of women cast off their veils and, in many cases, burned them. Such meetings continued for the next two years, but, unlike other campaigns of the cultural revolution, the *hujum* was called off in 1929. It had produced a massive backlash and was turning out to be counterproductive in every way. The *paranji* did not disappear until the 1950s.<sup>15</sup>

The 1920s also saw radical cultural transformation in Turkey and Iran, wrought by authoritarian regimes in pursuit of modernization, and in part at least driven by the same desperation that drove the Jadids. Although we have long since lost the comparative perspective on these transformative projects, it is worth remembering that at the time, these various projects were seen by their Muslim proponents as broadly similar, as part of a similar process of "awakening" and modernizing the Muslim world.

---

15 Much has been written on the *hujum* in recent years. Douglas T. Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), presents a relentlessly negative view of the *hujum*, which he sees as a case of imperial intervention into a pristine national community. Marianne R. Kamp, *The New Woman in Central Asia: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), offers a different account of the *hujum* which takes seriously the longer term development of Muslim debates on the question and the aspirations of women activists themselves.

## Disestablishing Islam

It was on the matter of religion that the Bolsheviks and indigenous reformers had the greatest differences. The Jadid programme was based on the modernization of faith; the Bolsheviks had absolutely no need of faith. Religion might be the “sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions,” as Marx had written, but it was, ultimately, “the opium of the people,” for which there was no need left in the brave new world of Communism. For the Bolsheviks, the irrationality of religion coincided neatly with its anti-revolutionary and exploitative essence, and it had to be rooted out.

By mid-1926 party authorities in the region felt ready to launch an assault on traditional society. It was ferocious and destructive, though it began modestly enough, with Uzbekistan’s people’s commissariats of justice and education beginning to shut down all unofficial schools. During the course of the following academic year, all old-method schools and madrasas were closed. Qazi courts were similarly and quickly suppressed. With its beneficiaries gone, the waqf administration was abolished and all property controlled by it nationalized; the religious boards were abolished by 1928. Along with schools and courts went the mosques. A few mosques had been closed earlier in the decade and their buildings given over to “socially useful” purposes, but the years between 1927 and 1929 saw a sustained campaign of closures and destruction directed against them. The closures were assigned either to the political police or to revolutionary *troikas*, three-member teams of (often self-appointed) officials that went around with the authority to close down schools or mosques and confiscate their property. Members of the Komsomol, the youth wing of the Communist Party, and of the Union of Militant Godless were prominent in this movement. The campaign against mosques tended to run out of control. Indeed, as Shoshana Keller has noted, the situation was so chaotic that there is hardly any documentation to be found in the archives until 1929.<sup>16</sup> Overall, we have better accounts of the destruction visited upon Islam in Central Asia by Genghis Khan than by the Soviets. There are no credible statistical data for mosques either, but the evidence of destruction was to be found in the form of half-destroyed or disused mosques that dotted the landscape for the rest of the Soviet era.

The destruction of mosques and shrines was accompanied by atheistic propaganda; all official proclamations and all acceptable art and literature had to put forth an atheistic take on life. Ultimately, the significance of atheistic propaganda lay not in its efficacy, which was little, but in the way in which it destabilized the terms of public debate. Atheism challenged Islam not so much

---

16 Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941* (Westport, CT: Praeger 2001), 175-87.

## BEING MUSLIM IN SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA, OR AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF MUSLIM MODERNITY

at the level of individual belief but as the font of moral and ethical values that could be held in public. Islamic values were forcefully displaced from the public arena, and they never acquired that position again. The campaign for atheism tapered off by the end of the 1930s, and the Union of Militant Godless disappeared during World War II; but the “disestablishment” of Islam as the major font of moral and ethical values for society was permanent.

The ulama had long been reviled both for being relics of a superstitious past that had now been superseded, and for being class enemies of the revolution and the oppressors of the toiling masses that were heroically striving to push History to its final stage. Again, we do not have eyewitness accounts to retrieve these atrocities from oblivion, but by the time the anti-religious campaign slowed down in 1932, thousands of ulama had been arrested and sent off to atone for the sins of their social origin in forced labour camps; many died or were killed and others “fell silent.” With old-method schools and madrasas destroyed, waqf property confiscated and redistributed, and qazi courts and the religious boards abolished, the patterns through which Islam had been transmitted in Central Asia were largely gone. In 1929 a country-wide law on Religious Associations defined the scope of “religious activity” that the regime was willing to allow in the new conditions. Religious activity could only take place in officially recognized societies or groups of “believers,” who had to be registered with local authorities. Religious organizations had the right to operate places of worship, although on terms dictated by the authorities. They were forbidden to form benevolent societies, render material support to members, or organize study circles or camps for children or youth.<sup>17</sup> The assumptions about religion that underlay the law — that it was a corporate enterprise undertaken by “believers” coming together in tangible organizations — derived from Christianity, but were now extended in Soviet practice to all religions.

The anti-religious campaign was curtailed only in 1941, when the onset of war led the regime to make peace with society. Restrictions on religious observance were eased, and in 1943 the Soviet state permitted the establishment of a Spiritual Directorate for the Muslims of Central Asia (or SADUM in its Russian acronym). It was an official organization, responsible to Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, with the task of regulating religious observance throughout the region. The purpose was as much to control religious activity as to facilitate it, and SADUM’s position was always ambiguous. Bureaucratic institutions such as this are alien to the Islamic tradition, which does not recognize the authority of officially appointed figures to make pronouncements on matters of belief or practice. SADUM’s authority was therefore never accepted without question by Muslims, but it nevertheless

---

17 Ibid., 188-93.

was able to train a small number of religious scholars and even to send some of them overseas for higher religious education. It also issued *fatwas* (legal opinions), often on demand of state authorities, to give Islamic justification to selected Soviet policies.<sup>18</sup> These fatwas are best seen as back-up insurance by Soviet authorities for policies or practice they felt could be unpopular. They had no legal standing in terms of Soviet law.

The destruction of the infrastructure of the reproduction of Islam is what makes Muslim societies under Soviet rule different from other parts of the Muslim world. The effects were of fundamental importance. As we shall see in greater detail below, Soviet Islam became localized and was rendered synonymous with tradition. With Muslim educational institutions abolished, the ranks of the carriers of Islamic knowledge denuded, and continuity with the past made difficult by changes in script, the family became the only site for the transmission of Islam. At the same time, since no new religious texts could be published, and oral chains of transmission were often destroyed, the available religious knowledge was vastly circumscribed.

### National and Civic Identities

These developments coincided with another significant phenomenon: the emergence and consolidation of strong ethno-national identities in Central Asia. The Soviet Union claimed to be a multinational state with a commitment to internationalism, but it nevertheless presided over the largest project of nation-building in human history.<sup>19</sup> As they consolidated power in the 1920s, the Bolsheviks were acutely aware that they bore the burden of Russia's imperial past. They had to overcome the distrust of the non-Russians by "indigenizing" Soviet power. Revolutionary propaganda was most effective if conveyed to each nation in its own language. But, ultimately, the Bolsheviks were convinced that nations were an "objective reality" that could not be wished away. Nationalism had also been a potent force in many parts of the country during the civil war. It was a necessary evil that had to be dealt with. If it would not go away, it had to be harnessed to revolutionary goals. Combined with other concerns about overcoming backwardness and cultural revolution, this reading of the situation led the Soviet regime to what can only be called a nation-building project. Each nationality had to be recognized officially and granted some degree of territorial autonomy. Giving each nation its own homeland would curb ethnic conflict and focus everyone's attention on the right kind of

---

18 See Shamsuddinon Boboxonov, *Shayx Ziyovuddinon ibn Eshon Boboxon (ma'naviyat va ibrat maktabi)* (Tashkent: O'zbekiston Milliy Entsiklopediyasi, 2001), for the texts of certain fatwas of SADUM.

19 Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53 (1994): 414-52.

## BEING MUSLIM IN SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA, OR AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF MUSLIM MODERNITY

conflict — that between social classes of the same nation. It would also, so went the argument, make administration easier and more efficient. Each nation would be equipped with education and publishing in its own language, its bureaucracy staffed ideally by its own people, and its members aware and proud of the “progressive” aspects of their own history. Thus would arise new progressive cultures, “national in form, socialist in content.”

There could be a wrong kind of nationalism, of course, and the Soviets constantly struggled against “bourgeois nationalism” — nationalism that provided a cloak for the exploitation of one class by another. In the purges of the 1930s, charges of nationalism proved fatal to untold thousands of individuals. By the end of the 1930s, however, certain broad principles had been worked out that were to provide the acceptable framework for nationality policies until the end of the Soviet era. Nations existed and one of the achievements of socialism was to allow them to acquire ever higher levels of progress. The celebration of one’s nation was permissible but had to be kept within fairly strict limits (no irredentist claims and no invocation of rivalry or animosity toward one’s neighbours). The Russians had to be acknowledged as the “elder brother,” whose disinterested help (in the form of leading the revolution) had made the current happiness of the other nations possible. The incorporation of the various non-Russian peoples into the Russian empire had to be seen as a union, not a conquest, that allowed the Russians to play the positive role scripted for them. Similarly, the Soviet Union was deemed to exist on the principle of the “friendship of the peoples,” which had to be maintained at all costs, as was the idea that the Soviet system had allowed for the resolution of all national conflicts. All of this necessitated a great deal of mental gymnastics and very selective, present-oriented readings of the past. Nevertheless, none of these limits brought into question the basic premise that every individual belonged to a nation defined by common origins, language, history, custom, and heritage, and that each nation had a collective existence of its own that transcended history. Nationality came to be seen as a primordial aspect of one’s identity.<sup>20</sup>

Ideas of the nation and nationalism had arrived in Central Asia well before the revolution of 1917, and as we have seen, were central to the worldview of the Jadids. Although the persecution of “bourgeois” nationalism was a key feature of the purges that decimated local elites between 1929 and 1938,

---

20 This provides only a very broad overview of a fascinating new literature that has reshaped our understanding of nation-formation in the Soviet period. In addition to Yuri Slezkine’s brilliant article cited above, see: Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); Robert J. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

ultimately, national identities in their properly Soviet form came to be ensconced in Soviet institutions. (And once the bourgeois nationalists had been done in, even many of their ideas crept back into official discourses of identity.) The guardian of the national heritage was the national intelligentsia, which in Central Asia was itself a creation of the Soviet regime. Its members found employment in an extensive network of universities, institutes, and academies, generously funded by the state. To be sure, nationalist chauvinism could not be expressed in official discourse, which emphasized the “friendship of peoples,” “Soviet internationalism,” and “the leading role of the Great Russian people, the elder brother.” Nevertheless, in the last three decades of the Soviet period, nationalist intelligentsias in each of the five Central Asian republics articulated a confident national identity.

### **Islam Without Markets**

The Soviet system under Brezhnev was defined by authoritarian politics and a command economy, which might better be termed an “economy of distribution,” in which the allocation of goods took place not through market forces or cash exchange, but through bureaucratic allocation. Access to scarce goods, therefore, required not cash, which could be useless in itself, but connections. A whole new social game emerged, in which informal practices came to define the way people pursued their goals in society and economy. The so-called “shadow economy” came about as a vast complex of private economic activity, some legal, some not. To the extent that the jagged edges of the official economy were smoothed by informal relations, the “shadow economy” was actually necessary. But it all meant that the actual operation of Soviet society bore little resemblance to the ideological slogans that everyone was obliged to mouth in public.

The golden age of the national intelligentsias was undoubtedly the “period of mature socialism” (before it became the era of stagnation). During this period, many union republics were effectively run by national party elites based on political mechanisms that had little resemblance to the formal, official rhetoric of the state. As long as republican leaders kept fulfilling their economic obligations to the centre and kept political demands under strict control, they were left with a great deal of leeway in running the affairs locally. For Central Asia, it meant fulfilling its assigned role as a cotton plantation — although considerable industrial growth took place, cotton monoculture dominated the economies of all the republics, with the partial exception of Kazakhstan. On this monoculture was built a new indigenous political class, well ensconced in the Soviet system. Brezhnev’s rule as First Secretary of the Party coincided with equally long spells in office by Sharaf Rashidov in Uzbekistan and Dinmuhamed Kunaev in Kazakhstan.

Soviet power was, however, never so absolute as to supplant all local solidarities with purely Soviet ones. Indeed, the lowest level of state and Party

## BEING MUSLIM IN SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA, OR AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF MUSLIM MODERNITY

organizations often coincided with traditional nodes of local society. In the cities, for instance, state and Party organizations were based on the *mahalla*, the residential neighbourhood, which had long been the site of reciprocal social bonds and of collective memory, and which continued to function as such in its Soviet guise. In the countryside, collective farms became sites of similar networks of kin-based solidarities.<sup>21</sup> Power at the ground level remained in local hands. Party leaders, such as Rashidov and Kunaev, presided over a political machine based on highly localized solidarity networks.

It was these solidarities that provided the base for the transmission of Islam in Soviet Central Asia. Thus, every collective farm, it seems, had a mosque, which was officially registered as a storage room or community hall; similarly, the imam received a salary as a tractor driver or a mechanic. Rituals were performed by men who claimed locally esteemed lineages, who transmitted the knowledge, usually quite slender, in the family. Other forms of observance also continued, while new forms of ritual arose to circumvent official restrictions. Visits to tombs and shrines had long been a part of the Islamic tradition in Central Asia; with the hajj not a possibility, they now became a common expression of piety.<sup>22</sup> Sufi practice was also widespread. The supervisory apparatus of the state, itself not immune to these networks of solidarity, left much of this practice alone as long as it remained discreet, and it was left to the professional propagandists of atheism to bemoan the continuing hold of religion and tradition on the population.

If local solidarities supported Islam in the Soviet period, they also marked it in very significant ways. While there is no question that religious observance continued and was widespread, it was not what was most important about being a Muslim. Rather, belonging to Islam now became a marker of national identity, for which no personal piety or observance was necessary. Islam came to be seen as an indispensable part of national customs and traditions that served to set Central Asians apart from outsiders. These customs and traditions included circumcision for boys (which was frowned upon as unhealthy by Soviet medical science, and hence its observance also had an aura of national opposition to Soviet dictates), the maintenance of patriarchal kinship networks, and the celebration of life cycle rituals. Indeed, the feasts (*to'y*) connected with these rituals (but especially circumcisions and weddings) acquired a central place as national customs in the Brezhnev period. The *to'y* served several purposes. Most clearly, it marked Central Asians as different from others living in their midst; it also served to affirm status within the national community. Conspicuous consumption and conspicuous possession of scarce consumer

---

21 Olivier Roy, *La nouvelle Asie centrale, ou la fabrication des nations* (Paris: Seuil, 1997).

22 This phenomenon attracted the attention of Soviet ethnographers and those responsible for anti-religious propaganda. See V. N. Basilov, *Kul't sviatykh v Islame* (Moscow, 1970).



goods were the most important ways of asserting status and influence in the late-Soviet context,<sup>23</sup> and the *to'y* was the most suitable occasion for this display. The *to'y* was nearly universally observed, including by members of the Party. But these very same ceremonies were also awash in vodka, the drinking of which became a part of national custom. Similarly, the vast majority of Central Asians, including Communists, were buried according to Islamic ritual in Muslim cemeteries; yet many Muslim graves were topped by busts of the deceased in the typical Soviet style. Traditions became a central aspect of how national identities were conceptualized in the Soviet context. But traditions are malleable: many were invented, while others imbued with an importance they had not previously had.

Islam was subordinated to these national identities. Central Asians were Muslims by tradition and civilization, but they were also part of the modern world. In the late Soviet period, being Muslim was a very important source of identity because it served to demarcate Central Asians (or *mestnye*) as Muslims from Europeans or Russians (who were deemed *prishlye*). The primary emphasis of this identity was on custom and way of life. "Islam" was understood as a form of localism, with little or no basis in Islamic dogma or strictures.

There was nothing new about this conception of Islam as inhering in the customs and traditions of the Muslim community. Until the advent of modernity, this view was precisely how the vast majority of Muslims had understood Islam (and the point can be made about all religious traditions). It was with the advent of modernity that reformist movements began to separate Islam from custom and tradition and to locate "true Islam" in scriptural sources. As scholars of Muslim societies have noted, this "objectification" of Islam — the extrication of "true Islam" from the landscape of custom and community — is very typical of Muslim understandings of Islam in the modern age, and is itself a product of modern understandings of religion and of the world.<sup>24</sup> In Central Asia, this shift was the work of Jadidism, a movement of religious and cultural reform that sought to restore Islam to its "original purity" by stripping it of the "encrustations of custom" through recourse to the Qur'an itself. Jadidism was especially critical of the *to'y*, which it saw as wasteful, and also as unsanctioned by Islam. It also criticized visits to shrines and tombs, and Sufi practices in general.<sup>25</sup> Yet the Soviet assault on Islam resulted in the practical disappearance of this modernist and modernizing current and brought custom and tradition back as the defining features of local understandings of Islam. What is truly paradoxical about Soviet Islam is that the great modernizing effort of the Soviet

23 Victoria Koroteyeva and Ekaterina Makarova, "Money and Social Connections in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Uzbek City," *Central Asian Survey* 17 (1998): 579-96.

24 See, for example, Dale F. Eickelman, "Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies," *American Ethnologist* 19 (1992): 643-55

25 Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*, 142-7.

## BEING MUSLIM IN SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA, OR AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF MUSLIM MODERNITY

regime in effect *de-modernized* Islam. By the late Soviet period, Central Asian understandings of Islam were more closely tied to custom and tradition than elsewhere in the Muslim world.

But it was more than a mere return to the situation that existed before the emergence of Jadid reform. During the Soviet period, Islam came to be a part of the civilizational and cultural heritage of a nation imagined as an ethnic entity. Instead of requiring the transformation of customary practices, Islam was now synonymous with them. Moreover, Islam now existed in a radically de-Islamized public space. The official rhetoric of the Soviet regime was framed in terms of universal human progress, defined in entirely non-religious terms. Religion was seen as a human construct corresponding with a certain (primitive) stage in the development of human society. Moreover, the ideological function of religion as the “opiate of the masses” was constantly emphasized. Official channels of socialization, most importantly the school system and the army, reached deeply into society. Islamic practice now took place in an environment that was hostile to all religions.

Yet, for all that, Soviet Islam was politically quiescent. Although Central Asians were quite conscious of their Muslim identity, that identity was not “pan-Islamic”: Muslims from other parts of the world who did not share Central Asian customs were not included in these boundaries of “Muslimness.”<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the rhetoric of Muslimness did not exclude the possibility of antagonism with other peoples of Central Asia, let alone with Muslims abroad. While Muslimness distinguished locals from outsiders in the Soviet context, most Central Asians did not see being Muslim as counterposed to being Soviet. The Soviet government presented Tashkent as a show piece to the Third World, especially the Muslim world, of Soviet achievements in overcoming underdevelopment. It was a common destination for large numbers of foreign students, many of them Muslim. Yet there was little love lost between them and their hosts precisely because their common Muslimness meant little to the hosts.

Indeed, most Central Asians took great pride in being citizens of a superpower, and of a state that stood against colonialism and oppression. Soviet patriotism was shaped by a number of powerful tools of socialization, foremost of which was universal education, achieved in the post-War decades, which shaped civic attitudes. For men, mandatory military service provided a further storehouse of common experiences shared with men from across the length and breadth of the country. There was also an undeniable pride in being citizens of a superpower. When they travelled abroad or interacted with foreigners, Central Asians did so as proud citizens of a superpower who were more “advanced” than

---

26 John Schoeberlein-Engel, “Identity in Central Asia: Construction and Contention in the Conceptions of ‘Özbek,’ ‘Tājik,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘Samarqandi,’ and Other Groups” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1994), 222-44.

their brethren in the Third World. The Soviet government showcased Central Asia, especially Tashkent, as models of development bypassing capitalism. Central Asians may not have been posted to European parts of the Soviet Union, but they were routinely appointed to diplomatic posts abroad, especially in the Muslim world, where many Central Asians served as ambassadors. Central Asians also served willingly in the Soviet armed forces. Although a glass ceiling kept Central Asians under-represented in the officer ranks, Central Asians served no more and no less willingly in the armed forces than any other Soviet citizens. They went as military advisors to foreign countries, especially in the Muslim world, and they fought in Afghanistan in large numbers.

## THE SOVIET CASE IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

### The Management of Islam

Although, historically, Islamic institutions have existed outside the control of the state, the situation has changed in the modern era. Modern states have commonly sought to reshape Islam, to institute bureaucratic controls over it, and to “put it to work” for the purposes of garnering legitimacy and creating new forms of public morality.<sup>27</sup> These attempts have varied in intensity, depending on historical peculiarities as well as the strength of the various states involved; but nowhere is Islam unaffected by the reach of the modern state. The Soviet case is thus far from unique, but it is unique in the intensity of the state’s assault on Islam and the longevity of the regime.

In the 1920s Atatürk enacted a number of reforms that transformed Turkish culture in ways parallel to the cultural revolution in Soviet Central Asia in the same decade. He did not launch an all-out assault on Islam, but he did subjugate Islamic institutions to the state. Atatürk abolished Sufi orders, broke the connection between the shariat and civil law by enacting new civil and penal codes borrowed whole cloth from European models, and revoked all privileges enjoyed by the ulama. Atatürk also regularly inveighed against “primitive” religious practices which, he thought, ought to have no place in an enlightened state. Islam, however, did not disappear from the public or from state education in Turkey: in an approved and properly “nationalized” form it continues to be the basis of the moral education of all pupils.<sup>28</sup>

In less radical forms, states in Egypt, Malaysia, and Indonesia have sought to shape or reshape Islam, Islamic education, and even observance. Weaker states, such as those in Pakistan and Bangladesh, have been much less successful in “nationalizing” Islam. The harshest repression of Islam has come

---

27 Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

28 Samuel Kaplan, *The Pedagogical State: Education and the Politics of National Culture in Post-1980 Turkey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

## BEING MUSLIM IN SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA, OR AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF MUSLIM MODERNITY

from socialist regimes which sought to bring about large-scale transformation of society and culture — China during the cultural revolution and Albania under Enver Hoxha, which declared itself the world's only atheistic state in 1967, are the most striking examples. In both these cases, however, the period of state persecution of Islam was shorter than the six decades of Soviet history.

Finally, the Soviet attempt to bureaucratize Islam through SADUM (and its counterparts for European Russia, Northern Caucasus, and Transcaucasia) is not unique. The model for SADUM was the Spiritual Assembly established in Ufa by Catherine II for Tatar and Bashkir Muslims in 1782. At that time, the Spiritual Assembly was unprecedented as a bureaucratic institution for Islam. The Hapsburgs organized Islam in Bosnia-Herzegovina along similar lines after they occupied the region in 1878, and similar institutions arose in all countries of south-eastern Europe with a Muslim population in the early twentieth century.<sup>29</sup> Since then the practice has been adopted in many Muslim-majority countries. The new Turkish republic made all Islamic religious activity subject to the supervision of a directorate of religious affairs (Diyanet İşleri Bakanlığı), whose task was to regulate religious observance and education throughout the country. Imams thus became government functionaries and mosques came under the control of the state. Moreover, the directorate has the right to adjudicate on questions of orthodoxy and heresy. Turkey, thus, also came to have an “official Islam,” complete with a bureaucratic structure. The government of France created a French Council of the Muslim Faith in 2003 to be “the French Government’s official interlocutor on Muslim affairs.”<sup>30</sup>

### Nationality Without a Nation-State

Beyond the confines of the Soviet Union, the central feature of Muslim life in the twentieth century was the advent of the territorial nation-state as the seat of legitimacy and sovereignty, and the node of solidarity and loyalty. The experience of Soviet Muslims differed in many ways here. They certainly experienced the state — indeed, they experienced it in a more ruthless form than any other group of Muslims — and they were no strangers to discourses of ethnic nationality. But they existed in a state that saw itself as a multinational federation. The state was quite successful in creating ties of loyalty among its citizens, including the Muslims. For Soviet Muslims, the nation and the state coexisted, quite peacefully, but they represented different poles of identity. Soviet Central Asians had nationalities without a nation-state.

As we have seen, the idea of nationality had arrived in Central Asia before the revolution and had been enthusiastically embraced by a small group of

---

29 Alexandre Popovic, *L'Islam balkanique: Les musulmans du sud-est européen dans le période post-ottomane* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986).

30 <<http://www.ambafrance-uk.org/Islam-in-France.html>>, (viewed 19 January 2008).

modernist intellectuals. It was Soviet nationalities policies and practices, however, that made nationality real for the people of Central Asia. One's nationality was listed on one's identity documents; it rendered one eligible or ineligible for jobs and other scarce resources; and it placed one in various social and political hierarchies in the Soviet state. Late-Soviet conceptions of nationality harked back to Romantic notions language, common descent through history, and attachment to specific territories. In this respect, Central Asians were thoroughly "nationalized" — belonging to a nationality defined in organic terms became part of the common sense of late-Soviet life, so that visitors were always asked who they really were "by nationality," and answers such as "Canadian," "American," or "Pakistani" did not suffice. But nationality was quite distinct from *citizenship*, which pertained to the Soviet Union. The constituent republics of the Soviet Union were all named after different national groups and were supposed to be homelands for each group. But they were not expected to exercise sovereignty on behalf of the "titular" nationality; in any case, in practice, the republics had little political leeway. The Soviet Union was highly centralized in terms of economic policy, with the republics having little say in deciding on allocations. The republics had flags and parliaments, but were not actors on the world stage.

Central Asians lived in a Muslim-majority region of a state that was neither Muslim-majority nor had much concern with Islam. Central Asian cities had large, in some cases preponderant, presences of Europeans, although in the late Soviet period, political power at the republic level was in Muslim hands. Soviet Central Asians experienced more thorough state- and nation-building projects than almost any other Muslim-majority population in the world, but they did not experience life in a nation-state — as the juridical seat of national sovereignty and an actor in the world at large. Rather, Central Asian political elites acted as national leaders within the circumscribed parameters of a Soviet world with its own economy and its own constraints. The constituent republics of the Soviet Union were, however, nation-states *manqués* in a way and once the union ceased to exist, they have all sought to transform themselves into full fledged nation-states, with explicitly defined policies of nationalizing the states.<sup>31</sup> But Central Asians missed out on the odyssey of hope and ambition attached to nation-states elsewhere in the world.

### **De-Islamization of Public Life and Islam as Nationality**

Perhaps the most lasting legacy of Soviet modernization in Central Asia is the drastic de-Islamization of public life. Many states have put Islam to use and

---

<sup>31</sup> I use "nationalizing the state" in the sense invoked by Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

## BEING MUSLIM IN SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA, OR AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF MUSLIM MODERNITY

created political spaces closed to the authority of Islam. But few went as far as the Soviet Union in subverting even the purely moral authority of Islamic sanctions. Law in Soviet Central Asia ceased to have any connection with the *shari'a* in the mid-1920s, and the situation has not changed. In post-Soviet Central Asia, these institutional continuities with the Soviet past remain very strong, and ensure that the post-Soviet states operate outside the discursive field of Islam.

The de-Islamization of public life did not, as we have seen, make Islam disappear from Central Asia, but rather, imparted it meanings peculiar to the Soviet context. It became a communal identity, but with little or no regard for the behavioural injunctions of the Islamic tradition. We see parallels elsewhere in the Muslim world of such “Muslim” identities — Lebanon and Bosnia come to mind most readily, but even the Turkish republic emerged as a homeland for the non-Arab Muslims of the Ottoman Empire, before the Turkish identity was thoroughly ethnicized.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, such Muslim identities have become rare since the rise of Islam as a political force in the last three decades. Central Asia missed the whole wave of Islamist political movements, and even after 15 years of independence, Islamism finds little fertile ground in the region.<sup>33</sup> We can therefore still find in Central Asia ways of being Muslim that are increasingly rare elsewhere in the Muslim world.

\* \* \*

**ADEEB KHALID** is professor of history at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. A graduate of McGill University, he did his doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is the author of *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (University of California Press, 1998), *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (University of California Press, 2007), and numerous articles on the cultural and political history of Central Asia since the Russian conquest.

**ADEEB KHALID** est professeur d'histoire au Carleton College à Northfield, au Minnesota. Diplômé de l'Université McGill, il a fait son travail de doctorat à l'Université de Wisconsin-Madison. Il est l'auteur de *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (University of California Press, 1998), *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (University of California Press, 2007) et de nombreux articles sur l'histoire culturelle et politique de l'Asie centrale depuis la conquête russe.

---

32 Soner Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?* (London: Routledge, 2006).

33 I have argued this point further in Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, especially, chapter 6.